

PAULA BOGGS BAND

Elixir is a fitting title for the Paula Boggs Band's new album: "It suggests a magic potion, something that will make things better for you if you ingest it," says Boggs, leader of the Seattle soulgrass group.

That's just what the singer and her band offer on their third full-length album. The 11 tracks on *Elixir — The Soulgrass Sessions* mix political-minded calls to action with love songs and personal reflections, for a blend as flavorful and enticing as any magic potion could be. "This album is more cohesive sonically than we've ever been," says Boggs, who sings and plays guitar and ukulele. "We have come to a sound that is uniquely ours."

The Paula Boggs Band's rich, rootsy style comes from its versatile lineup: guitarist and banjo player Mark Chinen; bassist and vocalist Isaac Castillo; multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Eric Vanderbilt Matthews; percussionist and vocalist Tor Dietrichson; and drummer Sandy Greenbaum. Together, they dial in a reverential feel on the love song "Gypsy Sapphire," as banjo and mandolin parts intertwine over subtle backing from acoustic guitar and keyboards. There's a gentle acoustic lilt to "Peel the Charade" that takes on a gospel feel as Boggs repeats, "Heal us, heal us," at the end of the song. Resonant piano and acoustic guitars anchor "Sleepwalking," a song that urges vigilance in the face of apathy and cynicism. "The lyrics really are a call to action for citizens to stay informed and engaged," Boggs says. "Literally woke. Like, don't sleepwalk!"

The tune is one of several songs on the album that carries on the citizen-artist theme that underpinned the Paula Boggs Band's 2016 live EP *Songs of Protest & Hope*. The musicians were in the studio recording *Elixir* on Election Day in 2016, and the tenor of the times couldn't help but seep into the songs. "We All Fall Down" was inspired by candidate Trump, she says, though the song has a broader application. "We can all trip," Boggs says. "It really doesn't matter whether you're white, black, brown, male or female, Christian, Muslim or Jew. It's a universal phenomenon."

"Benediction" comes from a deeper place. In many ways the centerpiece of the album, Boggs wrote the redemptive song in the wake of the 2015 mass-shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where a white supremacist murdered nine African-American parishioners after they welcomed him to a Tuesday night prayer service. Boggs shared lyrics to the song with a couple of lawyers she knows in South Carolina, and they helped arrange for the Paula Boggs Band to perform the tune with the church's choir at a memorial event in Charleston on the second anniversary of the massacre.

"It was incredibly moving," Boggs says. "In rehearsing the song and recording it, each member of the band had a personal reaction to it, but it really hit home when we landed in Charleston. There is a memorial to the Charleston Nine in the airport, so you literally can't enter the city of Charleston without being confronted by what happened two years ago."

For all her focus on current events and topical songs, Boggs shows a personal, introspective side on *Elixir*, too. She and the band convey a somber, wistful feeling on

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“Rearview Mirror,” with banjo, piano and a wash of cymbals over wordless vocal harmonies. Boggs wrote the song about saying farewell to Santa Fe, where she had owned a home for 15 years. The city played a formative role in her music career.

“When I retired from Starbucks, Santa Fe was the first place we went,” says Boggs, an Army Airborne veteran whose career has included a five-year stint as a federal prosecutor and working as a vice president at Dell and as Starbucks’ top lawyer. “We spent two months there. Part of it was making a transition from being general counsel of Starbucks to something else.”

Leaving the corporate world allowed her to focus on music full-time, while also serving on the boards of KEXP.org public radio, the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the video and audio company Avid Technology. She’s at once pleased and impressed with how the band has grown over the decade most of the musicians have been playing together. “It’s been an evolution,” she says. Bassist Castillo, a relative newcomer, joined in 2016, and Boggs credits him with enhancing the group’s music. “He just brings a magic to our sound that makes it richer and rootsier and all those good things,” she says.

In fact, the Paula Boggs Band has developed a dynamic so tight-knit that they branched in a couple of new directions on *Elixir*. They recorded their first instrumental, “Two Daughters,” which Mark Chinen wrote. “I’m so happy we have an original song on this album that was not written by me,” Boggs says.

They also updated their repertoire of cover songs with a spellbinding version of “Holocene” by indie-folk artist Bon Iver. “Almost every cover we’d done had come from the 1960s,” Boggs says, so the band decided that if *Elixir* were going to include a cover, it had to come from the 2000s. “Holocene” turned out to be an easy choice: the musicians all liked the song, and saw an opportunity to arrange it in a more discernible way than the oblique, effects-treated original. “The lyrics are mysteriously beautiful, and a lot of people don’t know that,” Boggs says. “We wanted to cover ‘Holocene’ in a way that really showcased the emotion of the song.”

As it happens, that same sensibility applies to all 11 tracks on *Elixir*, a collection of songs that are beautiful and emotional, from a group of musicians playing together at the peak of their powers. It’s a strong potion indeed.

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